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Understanding (disrupted) participation in community sports clubs: Situated wellbeing, social practices and affinities and atmospheres

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A B S T R A C T

Participation in sport is viewed as a key means of improving health and wellbeing in many countries, but the processes constituting participation in community sports clubs remain poorly understood. Although studies have considered the wellbeing implications of non-competitive and individual sporting activity, further theoretical and empirical work is required to understand (both sporting and non-sporting) participation in community sports clubs. In this article we consider the contribution of approaches to social practice, situated wellbeing and affinities and atmospheres to advance our understanding. Using the example of community cricket clubs in England and Wales, we consider the potential of such approaches and the implications of disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) crisis. In conclusion, we argue that in a period characterised by political, social and economic turmoil, being able to provide detailed, place specific accounts of the important relations and practices existing in and through community sports clubs is a crucial activity for social scientists.

Introduction

Participation in sport is viewed as a key means of improving health and wellbeing in many countries (Mansfield & Piggin, 2016). In the UK, for example, the current government strategy (Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation) sets out five outcomes that should be achieved through ‘regular’ and ‘meaningful’ participation in community sport (HM Government, 2015). These are a) physical wellbeing; b) mental wellbeing; c) individual development; d) social and community development; and e) economic development. However, these valued goals are not unproblematically obtained or delivered. Context and place can influence forms of participation and the outcomes people experience as local cultures and social organisation mediate shared and individual experiences. For example, Armour et al. (2013) highlighted how the outcomes of using sport to address youth ‘dissatisfaction’ were dynamic, individualised, and tied to the complexity of specific interpersonal relationships and, indeed, places. Similarly, Mayoh and Jones (2015) have discussed how participation can also have negative impacts (e.g., mental, physical, and social stress) and, along with Galvin and Todres (2011), suggest that well-being is not a fixed and stable entity. What appears to matter across this body of inquiry, then, are the experiences and sensemaking of social actors and their connections with, and to, others within particular settings (Crossley, 2011); something that remains largely under-explored in social sciences of health and, indeed, sport.

In seeking to remedy the situation outlined above, there have been increasing calls for social scientists to better address the ongoing entanglement of public health and sport (Mansfield and Piggin, 2016). Unfortunately,

our theoretical and empirical understandings of what participation in community sport ‘means’ to social actors and, relatedly, the social processes and practices through which engagement in these activities supports well-being remain embryonic at best (Andrews, 2016; 2017). As such, there is a need to take seriously the relations and practices occurring within and through community sport clubs, some of which may not be only focused on the playing of sport, but may also be integral to the production of affinities, kinship, emotions and solidarity (Mason, 2018; Andrews, 2016; Bates et al., 2019). Community organisations and events have a vital role to play in addressing social isolation for older people (Toepoel, 2013; Collins and Kenney, 2017) and continuing involvement in community sports clubs (beyond playing days) can be an important means by which social relations are maintained. However, such roles (and others) have been disrupted by the impacts of COVID-19 (Coronavirus). During this period of crisis, it is important to develop and apply insightful conceptual tools to understand the nature of meaningful social interaction in and through community sport. Simplistic conceptualisations of participation in sport or wellbeing risk ignoring or undermining existing features of community sport which enable meaningful activity, including (often voluntary) organisational, service, maintenance and coaching activities.

The focus of this article is on the means by which to conceptualise and understand the practices and processes underpinning and influencing regular and meaningful participation in community sport. It proceeds as follows: first, approaches to conceptualising wellbeing are considered and the value of a situated and relational approach to wellbeing is detailed and applied to the context of community sports clubs. Second, the relevancy of a social practice approach to understanding situated wellbeing is set out, followed by a discussion of the role of methods

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in trying to interpret social practices. This unfolds along with a consideration of the novel integration with approaches to place which are focused on emerging affinities, kinships and atmospheres. Third, there is an application of the ideas to the case of community cricket clubs and a reflection on the potential for future empirical studies. Ultimately, we argue that in a period characterised by political, social and economic turmoil, being able to provide detailed, place specific accounts of the important relations and practices existing in and through community sports clubs is a crucial activity for social scientists.

Situated wellbeing and sport

If wellbeing is a goal of participation in sport, it should be recognised that wellbeing is a contested concept (La Placa et al., 2013) characterised by a shift towards a personalised, consumerist set of 'wellbeing practices' at the turn of the 21st century (Sointu, 2005). Importantly for this article, these practices are thought to involve purposeful activity (whereas in previous eras these practices emerged from a notion of wellbeing as relaxation). Such a shift in the terms of wellbeing practices has intensified, and Carlisle et al. (2009) describe how the breadth of human emotions has become the focus of a narrow pathologisation in a quest for wellbeing. These critiques alert us to the argument that wellbeing might involve contestation over the scope of human experience, and encourage a consideration of what this might mean for understanding wellbeing as an element of participation in organised sport.

Our focus is upon what Smith and Reid (2018) identify as approaches to wellbeing that are centred upon the situated taking place of wellbeing (rather than those focused on fixed categorisation). Drawing on a reconsideration of Sen (1999) by Clark (2005), they reflect on the importance of recognising how practices are performed in specific cultural situations and spaces. They suggest that as a result, well (and ill) being emerges from a complex of actions. In detailing a relational approach to wellbeing, White (2017) is also sympathetic to this orientation, noting that the recurrent invoking of wellbeing in Western society is suggestive of a pervasive anxiety responding to atomisation and individualism. The social condition of anxiety has been discussed in terms of collective worry over death or meaninglessness, often provoked by an event (Jackson and Everts, 2010). Wellbeing can be usefully understood as a repost to meaninglessness (and death). To speak of participation and wellbeing is to speak of purposeful, positive action. When used as the focus of inquiry, wellbeing becomes a heuristic able to invoke all the questions and doubts of human experience while simultaneously presenting a keen interest in (the meaning of) happiness.

From the perspective of situated and relational wellbeing, the sporting 'situation' becomes a central focus for understanding the emergence (and persistence) of wellbeing in sport. Wellbeing continues to be a useful heuristic in that it focuses attention on the feelings, emotions and states people experience through their participation. Such experiences unfold in 'sites of sport' (Vertinsky and Bale, 2004) comprising distinctive senses of place, 'affinities' and 'atmospherics' (Mason, 2018). Conceptualising a sense of place in sport draws attention to the way sport places "shape the play, while also providing a context for different experiences and social interactions within and beyond it." (Vertinsky, 2004: 8). However, Hinchings and Latham (2017) are keen to emphasise the difference between 'sport' and 'physical fitness practices', suggesting the former might represent 'cliques of eager competitors'. While they are certainly correct in pointing out the popularity of activities (such as cycling, swimming and dancing) on a non-competitive (or non-'sportified') basis, we are arguing that attention be paid to some of the social practices (including those produced through sociality, solidarity and pleasure) that exist within and through community sport clubs (including football, cricket, rugby and cycling clubs, swimming clubs and dance clubs). Community sports clubs often include people who are not 'eager competitors', but enjoy the 'game' and spending time with others, help run the club on a voluntary basis and/or coach young people and children. This is not to say that cliques don't exist (and are in fact group-

ings to be explored). Andrews (2016) sets out some of the key ways in which inquiry into sport should be broadened to consider wellbeing and sport and a range of physical activities with some (not necessarily elite) competitive component. In particular, he draws attention to the need to consider a breadth of practices, performances and experiences which are present in different forms of sport. He argues that by considering the interrelationships of political-economy, collective and individual identities and sensory experiences occurring through (sporting) spaces, then "...the dynamics between sports, health and place..." (p.4.) might be better understood.

From our perspective, community sports clubs should be considered as places oriented around a particular activity (the sport) and produced through social (and material) relations which are continually emerging through identifiable practices. These practices involve 'affinities' between those individuals sharing the practices and the place being produced. For Mason (2018: 1) affinities "...are those connections that feel 'kindred' in some way, or make things kindred, whether or not they involve a family or kinship link as conventionally defined...Crucially affinities are personal connection that have potency." Affinities and 'ineffable' kinship (those distributed resemblances which can form allegiances and alliances) are continually produced within place (and produce place) and through time (Mason, 2018). Intergenerational and cross-cultural dialogue is often an important component of place-making and making things 'kindred' within sports clubs, and should be conceptualised as key practices to be interrogated empirically. It has been suggested that intergenerational, familial sporting cultures are key enabling features of sporting participation by young people (Birchwood et al., 2008; Wheeler, 2012; Hayoz et al., 2019). While such sporting cultures can include parental conceptions of 'good' parenting, generative parenting and a belief in positive outcomes (Wheeler, 2012), intergenerational and family sporting cultures can also operate across and between families, friends and social groups and focus on particular community sports teams. Participation, therefore, can mean more than playing the sport, and involves identities, kinship and affiliations. Indeed, many people involved in community sports teams do not 'participate' in that narrow sense, but may be valuable sources of action, advice, support and institutional memory, undertaking considerable emotional labour to enable participation (Roderick et al., 2017).

The emergence of wellbeing through participation in specific places of sport (or sporting situations) is considered by Bates et al. (2019). In a study of young people's experiences of wheelchair basketball, they draw on Duff's (2011) notion of the 'enabling place' to detail the site specific social practices producing wellbeing. Their analysis incorporates the materiality of the sport (equipment, playing surfaces), the sociality of the sport and the affective properties of the sport (feeling 'real'). They suggest that wellbeing emerges as the sport itself allows participants to expand their 'place-in-the-world'. Their study highlights how, in the context of community sport clubs, situated wellbeing emerges from a complex of relationships, processes, atmospheres and affinities which exist in the situation. Through this complex (or nexus), social practices take place.

To develop our argument for the conceptualisation of emerging situated wellbeing in and through community sport, in the following section we consider the contribution of theories of social practices. In doing so, we discuss the value of approaches to social practices sensitive to atmospheres and affective spaces. We then consider the implications of a social practices approach for methods.

Studying social practices

While practice is an established term in the social sciences, it has been theorised in a multitude of ways, including as theories of social practice (Shove et al., 2012; Nicolini, 2012; Blue et al., 2016; Hui et al., 2016). In his influential consideration of the characteristics of social practice theory, Reckwitz (2002) identifies practices as types of behaviour which are routinised. Practices are repetitious ways of doing;

incorporating talk, bodies, minds, emotions, knowledge and things. Examples include ways of doing cooking, or doing shoe repairs, or doing a medical consultation. Practices may comprise interactions between humans (as in the case of a medical consultation), but they are not necessarily defining features of a practice (as may be the case for cooking in certain circumstances). It should also be said that while behaviour may become routinised – for instance the medical consultant may have developed an established routine for doing consultations with patients – practices can be disrupted (by, for example, a knowledgeable and assertive carer). Practices can offer a bridging concept allowing the implications of micro-scale interactions and macro-scale institutional and politico-economic processes. Importantly, this conceptualisation of interdependence between individuals means that practices constitute collective action (Barnes, 2001).

For Blue et al. (2016), an important emphasis of social practice theory is on understanding how commitment to participate arises through engagement (rather than from an individual pre-cursor). They recognise that people do have reasons for becoming involved in a practice-arrangement bundle (an organisation), but that these reasons become integrated as one of several actions which will make up practices and their continued performance. Further, Reckwitz (2012) elaborates on the importance of emotions, senses and spaces to social practices, emphasising that every social practice forms senses and perceptions in particular ways. Building on his theorisation of social practices, he proposes that “Every complex of social practices – as far as it is always spatializing and necessarily contains perceptive-affective relations – implies a form of affective space.” What Reckwitz – as with Mason (2018) – is drawing attention to is the notion of ‘atmospheres.’ He acknowledges the work of Böhme (2000) in this area, but stresses the need to recognise the specific sensitivities and perceptions of groups participating in particular practices providing distinctive connections to atmospheres. From this perspective, spaces, atmospheres and social practices are key constituents of social life.

By focusing on practices – the repetitious ways of ‘doing’ – the aim is to understand how relationships and culture operate in and through community sport clubs and to explore the implications of this for wellbeing and forms of participation. Practices are more than individual activities; they are particular forms of routine and meaningful ‘doings’ which are recognised and practiced by groups. There may be a number of groups comprising the overall sporting organisation, each with particular (possibly shared) practices. Practices can also circulate between other groups and organisations. This is in-keeping with the contention Schatzki’s (2005) contention that an organisation is a practice-arrangement bundle. Adopting such a perspective in order to examine participation in sports clubs allows for attention to be paid to important mediators of wellbeing which may be overlooked by others forms of analysis. Emotions, atmospherics, spaces and routine, meaningful doings (social practices) take on particular forms of significance when participation is understood in this way (Andrews, 2017; Thorpe and Rinehart, 2010). If understanding situated wellbeing in community sport clubs is to be focused upon social practices, how are social practices best studied? An interpretive approach is required, but what might particular methods offer?

It has been argued by Hitchins (2012) that talk is an appropriate means of understanding social practices and that semi-structured interviews can play an important role in producing accounts of shared, routinised activities. In a study of food safety practices of people over 60, Milne (2011) made use of focus groups to generate talk about the actions they took in relation to food storage. An important element of his analysis was the location of food storage practices within a “nexus of things, knowledge, rules and routines...” For Keane et al. (2017), the findings of their survey based study on vaping as a social practice provided important insights which could be developed or complemented by naturalistic approaches. Talking about practices can be difficult, and Lee et al. (2016) explored how (serial) semi-structured interviews could be adapted to enable more meaningful talk about information practices.

In their example, the (studied) social practice mediates the method, alerting us to the need for research practices to be responsive to the forms social practices can take.

The value of ethnography in understanding social practices is demonstrated by Meah (2014), who considers the tacitly performed activities comprising kitchen practices. Combining participant observation with focus groups enabled insights from the latter method to focus the scope of the former. Both methods produced relevant insights into people’s practices and so reported *and* performed activities could be identified, interpreted and made the subject of further enquiry. Iaquineto (2018) has reflected on the relative contribution of methods to understanding social practices, suggesting that people can forget or overlook practices during talk, while recognising that some practices might not be observable. These insights suggest that studying social practices involves multiple methods, which can be deployed at different times and for different purposes. Likewise, in their review of the use of ethnographic methods in sports psychology, Krane and Baird (2005) discuss the role of various forms of interviews; from informal brief discussions to pre-arranged semi-structured interviews using a topic guide. They make the case for a suite of methods to be deployed in order to understand shared practices.

A brief consideration of the case of community cricket clubs

So far, this article has considered the potential of situated and relational wellbeing and theories of social practice to understanding participation in community sports clubs. In this section, consideration is given to how such approaches might be applied to the case of community cricket clubs.

The sport of cricket – in particular community club cricket organised by local and regional leagues in England and Wales – provides an interesting focus in order to interrogate the above proposal. Relatively little social science research exists on community cricket clubs. Fletcher and Spacklen (2013) and Fletcher and Walle (2015) have drawn attention to some of the important social and cultural implications of ethnicity and participation in club cricket, focusing in particular upon British Pakistani Muslim men. Key findings from the studies include the role that alcohol plays in mediating inclusion and exclusion into social practices and the development of belonging, friendships and resistance through Asian-specific teams and leagues. Cricket has a history intertwined with the British empire (and social class) and over centuries and decades has given rise to complex relationships and responses to these issues, including challenges to structural racism (see for example the seminal James, 1963/2013 which considers this, and much more). For community cricket clubs in England and Wales, issues related to social class, gender, ethnicity, culture and racism are all present to varying degrees (as with broader society), but their manifestation and impact for situated wellbeing and social practices in these sporting spaces and places requires further investigation. For example, the financial cost of participating in the sport may encompass household incomes and cultural attitudes to sporting participation. They might be addressed by engagement work and equipment loaning undertaken by the club and regional cricket boards.

Community cricket clubs can vary in many obvious ways, including in their local environment, facilities, levels of competition, demographics and history. Issues related to cross-cultural dialogue (or exclusion) are particularly pertinent to community cricket clubs, as are intergenerational relationships and gender-related practices. For example, 216,000 women played cricket in 2019 (33,000 regularly) and the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) have ambitions to make the sport gender-balanced (ECB, 2019). Coleman et al. (2008) suggest that family and friends are significant influencers on young women participating in sport. Families, friendship groups, affiliations, sporting ability, identity, altruism and emotional labour are all at work when we consider what comprises a community cricket club. It is apparent that in many ways community cricket clubs are institutions through which identities and relationships are mediated. Our contention is that social

practices, spaces and atmospheres are key mediators of the way such social (sporting) lives happen.

As detailed previously, when [Mason \(2018\)](#) talks of affinities, she means potent connections, imbued with kinship and enabled by atmospheres. Mason claims this perspective involves paying attention to sensations. So while cricket clubs may contain more literal kinships, we should also regard them as spaces where sensations are present and unfolding and with which people may feel kinship. Following [Schatzki \(2005\)](#), an organisation such as a community cricket club is a practice-arrangement bundle and the social practices constituting the bundle arise within and are mediated by such potent connections. The 'overt' activities of the cricket club (matches, net practices, coaching, social events, committee meetings, tea making, ground keeping etc) are in fact complex, shared, comprising social practices mediated by sensations and making up the space and place of the club. What this means is that 'participation' in community cricket clubs – if we are to take the term seriously – requires rigorous conceptualisation. In the remainder of this section, one of these activities – net practice sessions – will be considered, and the potential of these analytical approaches discussed. Net practice sessions are called 'net' sessions due to the use of netting to separate batting and bowling 'pitches' in to two or more strips to enable multiple sessions. The situations described are drawn from personal experience and are not intended to be the analysis of a data set, although there some similarity with auto-ethnographic approaches (see [Allen-Collinson and Owton, 2015](#) for example). The aim is to consider the value and potential of the approach detailed previously.

For many community cricket clubs, net sessions serve a number of functions. They are, of course, a chance for those club members who want to play the sport to practice their skills. There is a strong seasonality to net sessions (as with many things associated with cricket and other field sports), with winter net sessions taking place indoors (usually in a local sports hall) and representing – for some – the first chance to reengage socially (in person, and not through a club chat group) for a number of months. Once the playing season approaches (April in the UK), nets move to the club and take place outdoors. A number of interesting activities unfold at winter nets. New club members who wish to play (not all members do so) often come along to demonstrate their prowess (or lack of), meet up with new teammates (some of who they may already know) and become part of the club's social practices. The first winter net session is often a chance to catch up and chat as much as take seriously the business of batting and bowling (although there are differences in the forms 'seriousness' takes within and between clubs, often humour suffuses much of the action). Net sessions are often organised around senior men, senior women and juniors, with some fluidity between these formal divisions depending on ability, numbers, keenness for extra practice, among other reasons. Playing kit, perhaps which hasn't seen daylight for several months may be discussed, fiddled with and put on. Some players may even have new equipment; a new fancy bat received as a gift or a new pair of batting gloves purchased to replace the threadbare husks of fabric worn over previous decades. As well as reminiscing over seasons past, new incidents are bound to occur in the early sessions as the specific bodily movements of batting and bowling test out muscles and limbs, young and old. Many of these features are evident in the outdoor summer nets which usually take place at the home ground of the club, though new practices merge. Activities oriented to the upkeep of the club (bar tending, ground maintenance, tidying changing rooms etc) merge with net practices, and with others.

The 'upkeep of the club' involves (not exclusively) shared practices focused on making sure things are maintained 'correctly'. Picking up litter from the playing field, keeping changing rooms free from drinks bottles and dirty kit, maintaining perimeter fences and the sightscreens (large white boards on wheels used to help the batsman see the ball), parking vehicles in appropriate places and ensuring the playing pitch (the strip onto which the ball is bowled) is a good one through ground keeping (itself a topic with unlimited potential for debate and action). From these examples, it can be understood that shared practices will

emerge from the interactions of 'playing' practices – such as an outdoor net session – and 'upkeep' practices. They may exist in tension (when a changing room is left in an untidy state). Here is not the place to discuss these activities and social practices at length, but even through this brief discussion of a specific area of activity (net practice sessions) it can be seen that many interesting things which might come under the topic of 'sport' occur in and through sports clubs.

From the perspective of situated wellbeing and social practice theory, it is through the sporting situation (the nexus of things, actions, resources, interactions) that wellbeing emerges in a particular form (wellbeing from participation in sport), but it must be recognised that other 'practice-arrangement bundles' may influence such situated wellbeing (such as family based situations). While observing social practices as they unfold in the sporting situation is important, talking to participants about these practices is equally important, particularly so an understanding of what might comprise wellbeing can be ascertained. To develop and test such an approach requires empirical investigation drawing upon the range of (ethnographic) methods discussed previously. As well as providing unique insights into sport-related activities ([Krane and Baird, 2005](#)), such methods enable access to embodied sensory experiences ([Allen-Collinson and Orton, 2015](#); [Saville, 2008](#)) and enable the conceptualisations detailed previously to be explored through 'real' (emerging) world experiences. It is also important to recognise that those people who are no longer involved in such social practices may be able to provide valuable insights into adverse impacts on wellbeing.

The implications of COVID-19 for shared social practices

From 16th March 2020, club and recreational cricket in the UK (along with all other group sporting activities) was suspended in response to COVID-19 (Coronavirus). There are significant implications for the arguments that have been presented in this article, not least the survival of community clubs cricket clubs ([The Guardian, 2020](#)). The social practices of community sports clubs have been radically altered by new practices of physical distancing, hygiene, self-isolation and shielding. Reconsidering the example of net sessions provides an insight into the unfolding implications. The England and Wales Cricket Board issued guidance for the use of outdoor cricket facilities ([ECB, 2020](#)), which as of 28th May 2020, included maintaining physical distancing, training with members of your own household and one other person from outside household to a maximum of two, and ensuring hygiene measures such as cleaning of equipment and not rubbing saliva on the cricket ball (which is a common method of changing the properties of the ball). Following this, new guidance was issued by the UK Government permitting gatherings of up to six people but applying the same physical distancing measures and hygiene implications ([Cabinet Office, 2020](#)). Restrictions on the use of clubhouses (limited to toilet access) remained. As a result, the shared social practices of net sessions are radically altered. More broadly, these changes permeate every aspect of community sports clubs, from the cancellation of fixtures to the closure of social spaces and the conduct of committee meetings using video technology. Club and recreational cricket did resume from late July to mid September, with restrictions in place. The future for community sports clubs – as with many other aspects of life – remains uncertain and the social practices that comprise them will be subject to potentially significant reconfigurations.

Conclusions

In this article, we have argued that in order to understand how participation in community sport contributes to wellbeing, it is necessary to draw on approaches to situated wellbeing and social practices which are sensitive to the emergence of wellbeing in and through the 'sporting situation'. From our brief discussion of one area of activity in community cricket clubs – net sessions – it is possible to begin to develop a theoretically informed analysis of the bundles of social practices which comprise meaningful participation. Such practices are imbued with atmospheres;

affective moods which arise from club houses, equipments sheds, grass fields, argument and shared laughter (Anderson, 2009; Reckwitz, 2012). Moreover, Mason (2018) draws attention to the affinities for space and place that are generated through an assemblage of material, social and emotional processes. In a period characterised by political, social and economic turmoil – brought about by austerity policies, public health crises and political choices – being able to provide detailed, place specific accounts of the stable/unfolding and enabling/problematic relations and practices existing in and through community sports clubs is a crucial activity for social scientists.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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